DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 266 522 CS 505 218

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TITLE Personally Confronting Intercultural Communication Problems--An Intensified, Extended Process.
PUB DATE Feb 86
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Speech Communication Association (Tucson, AZ, February 15-18, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Problems; Cultural Awareness; Higher Education; *Intercultural Communication; Intercultural Programs; Interpersonal Communication; Social Attitudes; *Social Cognition; Speech Communication; *Speech Curriculum

ABSTRACT

To personalize a course in intercultural communication at a northwestern university, each student is allowed to design an individual project concentrating on a single area of prejudice held by each student. Students select a target area and then treat the problem (and the communication breakdown it represents) as the real enemy. They choose from a variety of sources of information and contact intercultural resources in grappling with their prejudices. All students record their progress in journals, which are handed in at midterm and at the completion of the project. Oral and written reports are required at midterm and at the conclusion of the course. (An outline of the personal project given to all students at the beginning of the course is included.) (DF)

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PERSONALLY CONFRONTING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS-- AN INTENSIFIED, EXTENDED PROCESS

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Abstract

In an attempt to personalize the course in Intercultural Communication, each student designs an individual, on-going project for concentrating upon a single, yet significant deficiency or concept. After the student selects a target area, he/she begins an active, overt campaign to manage, reduce, or eliminate the intercultural communication deficiency. Treating the deficiency or problem as a real "enemy", each student begins a series of "attacks", as though engaged in a real "battle." These "attacks" are methods of deliberate confrontation, such as interviews, media sessions, writing periods, creative activities, social events, or sharing engagements. Journals are kept of the "attack" sessions; oral and written reports are provided at mid-term and end-of-course dates. Students share their perceptions of progress and their recommendations to others with similar problems.

PERSONALLY CONFRONTING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS-- AN INTENSIFIED, EXTENDED PROCESS

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Eastern Washington University

> This project has been a very challenging adventure for me. Due to the fact that I have never taken the time to identify the prejudices I have, I consequently never imagined how difficult a task it could be to attempt to overcome a problem as personal as the one I chose. I did not anticipate that so many areas of my life would be affected by the issue at hand. Throughout the course of the project, I began to see that many of the feelings I have toward certain people are based upon a lack of knowledge. I especially found this to be true concerning those individuals who were the focus of my project--teenage alcoholics. As I began to learn more about alcoholism and its causes, my attitude toward alcoholics in general slowly began to change. Although I did experience a few setbacks during my project, my progress, for the most part, was continuous, and I feel as though I have benefitted both personally and socially due to this project.
>
> Karen
> Final Report
> May 26, 1985

In an attempt to personalize the course in Intercultural Communication, each student designs an individual, on-going project for concentrating upon a single, yet significant intercultural, subcultural, or counter-cultural communication deficiency or problem. Such was the project being reflected upon by Karen. After she had selected her target area, strong prejudice against teenage alcoholics and concurrent antagonistic behavior, Karen began an active, overt campaign to manage, reduce, or possibly eliminate her undesirable communication behavior. Treating the problem as a real "enemy," Karen began a series of "attacks," as though engaged in a real "battle".

Departing from the warfare parody, Karen consciously and

deliberately confronted her problem through such activities as interviews with teenage alcoholics and alcohol-abuse experts, studying educational films on alcoholism, personal writing sessions, and attending social events with teenage alcoholics. A journal was kept by Karen in order to document each of her "attack" sessions. Finally, she prepared and presented oral and written reports at mid-term and near the end of the course. Karen concluded by sharing her perceptions of progress and she presented recommendations to her classmates who may have experienced similar intercultural communication problems.

Dozens of students like Karen have reported similar feelings of dramatic progress since the inception of this project in 1980. Details are provided here of the four major divisions of the project: (1) problem areas; (2) "attacks"; (3) journals, and (4) reports. An outline which serves as a handout and summary of the project is included also.

Problem Area

The object of this project, of course, is to encourage students to take a conscious, aggressive approach to an intercultural comunication problem which is revealed in an intercultural communication course or unit. Intensive reading and discussion of intercultural communication concepts, barriers, and vocabulary occurs during the first few class meetings so that students can identify the uniqueness of this discipline and its related difficulties. They also are encouraged to look at their own personal behaviors, values, and beliefs of an intercultural nature, so that they may begin to find a personal focus for this elaborate assignment.

After the first two weeks, or approximately eight fifty-minute meetings, the project is presented to the class. Each student is asked to choose from a list of thirty possible topics, which includes such

symptomatic intercultural communication difficulties as racial prejudices, conflicting values, ethnocentric behaviors, and culture shock. The last item on the list is "Others-your choice," which gives everyone freedom to design the project to meet highly individualized needs and preferences, or topics simply overlooked by the instructor. After choosing one of these general topics, students narrow it to a specific intercultural communication problem that suits their individual needs.

On the whole students have chosen topics for the project that are challenging and relevant. The most typical problem area chosen for the project is prejudice against a particular minority such as Blacks, Native Americans, Chicanos, or Arabs. Sometimes a student will choose conflicting values to focus upon, as in the case of those who do not accept the American work ethic or the value of the individual superseding the value of groups. Homosexuality conflicts or intolerance have received quite a bit of attention in this project as well. In fact, one male student used the project to deal with his own homosexuality and he perceived enough trust with the class to make his first public disclosure of his homosexuality during his final oral report. A female student revealed that homosexuality had caused her to deeply resent and avoid intimate relationships with men when she was suddenly informed by her fiancee that he was homosexual and was breaking their engagement. She used this project to control her aggression toward male homosexuals, and she wrote in her final report: "Although I'm happy with the progress I've made, I realize that this project should be nonending for me. I would like to continue working on overcoming any types of hang-ups that I have concerning homosexuality."

Other problem areas confronted during this personal project

include:

-Animosity toward the obese

-Prejudice against "born-again Christians"

-Prejudice against atheists

-Fear of those with special needs, mental or physical

-Negative attitudes toward military personnel

-Avoidance behavior with older citizens

-Culture-shock

Some projects are not so typical, but nonetheless they represent serious and worthwhile efforts toward self-improvement in intercultural communication. For instance, a female student who had been raped attempted to use the project to deal with her antagonism toward males and to come to grips with her feelings about her trauma. This problem was not a suitable one for this assignment, as the project was not designed to provide the kind of therapy and psycho-emotional support needed by this student. If the project was helpful in this case, it was probably because it focused this student's energies upon a highly serious personal crisis and it provided an outlet for requesting professional help, which she is now receiving.

Other problem areas chosen for the project which were somewhat unusual included prejudice against cohabiting/ unmarried couples, poor interpersonal listening skills, male/female role definition in marriage, acculturation, premature evaluation of others ("first impressions"), and even antagonism toward "punk rockers." One Black-American used the project to research his "roots" or learn more about his African heritage when he realized that he simply could not share any of his family history with friends or other members of the class.

It should be pointed out that two fairly consistent

misinterpretations of the problem-area selection phase of the project seem to occur. First, some students see the project as an opportunity to deal with other important communication problems, as exemplified by the student who wanted to improve his interpersonal listening or the student who felt inadequately prepared for job interviews. Second, students may be vague or overly ambiguous about their problem and they frequently need help in narrowing and focusing. For instance, a student may choose "stereotyping", "prejudice," "chauvinism", "too critical of others," or "superiority attitude" to identify their problem area, and their lack of focus may be revealed in their first discussions with the instructor or in their first reports. The project is most effective when problem areas are narrowly and clearly defined and progress can be more easily assessed. As problem-solving research has discovered, too, commitment to solution of the problem is greater when the problem is clear and specific.

Before moving to the "Attack" phase of the project, a final word of caution about Problem Areas needs to be included. There is real potential for students to use this project to deal with personal problems that are out of place in undergraduate courses in Intercultural Communication. While "Intercultural Communication" is broadly defined for this project, and students generally receive the benefit of the doubt about the appropriateness of their chosen Problem Area, they are encouraged to seek professional counseling and medical assistance with serious psycho-emotional problems. As pointed out above, rape victims, for example, are more likely to benefit from the guidance and support of professionals who are experienced in this kind of support and treatment than if the student uses this project for therapy. The project can be used effectively to supplement other personal therapies, but the project must be thoughtfully and precisely

limited with full involvement of the instructor.

Attacks

Many students are aware of their Intercultural Communication problems, but they make little effort to change, choosing instead to procrastinate, accept the problem as a personality trait, or find some other way to rationalize their source of dissonance. Since this project is a course requirement, though, it becomes a convenient avenue for pursuing intercultural change and improvement through a diverse series of conscious and deliberate remedies. Students have usually considered the obvious treatments, such as personal reflection, reading, or discussions with friends and associates, but through this project they also are encouraged to discover other potentially useful methods.

A variety of eleven "attack" methods, or sources of information and contact with intercultural communication resources, are presented, so students select at least two of these methods. A minimum of thirty minutes for each attack session is required, and students employ at least ten of these attack sessions before completing the project. In other words, students may choose to confront their problem at least ten times during the course through interviews, media sessions, sharing sessions, creative approaches, or other methods. Each attack session will require at least a half-hour; the entire project, then, will consume a minimum total of five hours for these attack sessions.

Briefly, the eleven possible methods of attack and an example of each are:

A. An interview with an appropriate resource person. A student who confronted his prejudice against Chicanos interviewed the Director of the Chicano Education Program on our campus.

B. A discussion with an individual or individuals who are

"victims" of the problem. The student mentioned above also met with a group of three Chicano students to discuss his perceptions of Chicano culture.

C. A reading session. The article, "Growing Up Gay--One Family's Crisis," Newsweek, January 13, 1986, describes the emotional difficulties experienced by a 26-year-old male homosexual.

D. A media session (audio recording, videotape, film, or slide/tape synchronization). Popular films like "Ghandi" or "Passage to India" and television productions like "Roots" are worthy depictions of cultural differences that make a difference, and they can be useful sources for discovering bases for intercultural behaviors.

E. A social event wherein intercultural problems can be confronted and progress assessed. A group of Saudi Arabians hosted a dinner and cultural exchange which was attended by a student working on his prejudice against Saudis.

F. A sharing session with other members of the class. Excluding the formal, required class reports, students frequently meet with trusted classmates to reveal their intercultural problems and to share successes and failures among their attack methods.

G. A visit to another class or group meeting wherein the intercultural problem is studied or demonstrated intensively. Attending a local meeting of the Foundation for the Blind can be highly informative for the person confronting his or her discrimination against people with special physical needs.

H. A writing period for the purpose of outlining, organizing, describing, or clarifying an existing problem. This popular attack method, similar to diary entries, allows the student to see and feel a problem decoded to verbal symbols in a highly private setting. One Black student said that he first understood his intense dislike for

some white Americans after he wrote in graphic detail about two of his most painful childhood experiences with whites.

I. A confrontation with the problem in a setting where newly-discovered skills or techniques are required. Near the end of her project, one female who had a particularly difficult time talking to older people made a point of baking cookies and going next door to visit with her elder neighbor.

J. A creative approach through art, music, writing, culinary art, crafts, or photography. Creative writing is frequently used to grapple with an issue, as was the case with the author of the poem, "Seeing Ourselves," who revealed her perceptions of unintentional harm resulting from uncontrolled prejudice.

K. Others. Did I overlook something? Are there other attack methods that could be helpful? Of course there are, and this instructor's "miscellaneous" or "safety-valve" allows for students' ingenuity in devising other means for attacking their problems. One student who deeply resented certain Indian tribes, for instance, conducted a public debate on Indian Fishing Rights, and he argued against his own previously-held position. Another student conducted the advertising campaign for local Special Olympics activities as part of his project.

Not all of these attack methods prove to be beneficial to projects, of course. Some reading sessions are not fruitful. Some interviews do not go well, and in fact may make problems even worse. And participating in a group session with equally aggressive or prejudicial members may reinforce negative attitudes. Instructors need to prepare students for the potential risks in these activities, and periods of regression should be expected. Problems confronted during these projects have usually taken a long time to develop; patience and

perseverance are required to overcome them, so these projects should be viewed with foresight and maturity. A variety of approaches should generate more options, more revelations, and more likelihood for change, though research is needed to document such an assertion.

Journal

A record of each attack session is kept in a journal which is handed in at mid-term, returned to the student, then handed in again at the completion of the project. Each journal entry consists of five items: (1) chronology and location; (2) attack method; (3) area of concentration; (4) progress assessment, and (5) objective for next attack. Each journal entry should begin on a new page in the notebook with the attack number, date, time consumed, and location of the attack identified. Referring to the list of attack methods above, the session is then identified by method. Next, the specific area focused upon in this particular attack session is described. For instance, a student might identify Chinese History as the target for a particular session, then later choose Chinese social customs as another area of investigation. After the area of concentration is identified, an assessment of personal progress is recorded. Students are urged, obviously, to address their progress candidly and realistically, and to avoid the temptation to exaggerate or otherwise impress the instructor. Finally, in order to foster continuity and coherency, goals or objectives for succeeding attack sessions are written. Students are not able always to adhere to specific plans from one session to the next, and goals are frequently refined, but a general project plan evolves from the journal.

An important additional value of the journal is that it serves as a check on the numbers of certain attack methods used. Furthermore, journals serve as referral documents for oral and written reports.

Reports

Both oral and written reports are presented at mid-term and at the conclusion of the course. The reports differ to some degree, so details are provided for each.

Caution! Privacy and confidence must be guaranteed to all parties in these projects. Written reports are held in strict trust by the instructor! Names involved may be real or fictionalized, but reporters must be assured that all written materials will be returned and that contents are secret. In turn, when oral reports are prepared and presented the same principles of privacy and confidence must apply. Particularly during mid-term oral reports, the first disclosures of project topics and goals, students are encouraged to tell only what is comfortable to them. This may be an important "teachable moment" to deal with communication ethics, trust, and self-disclosure.

Mid-term

Since some students procrastinate after initially receiving this assignment, mid-term reports serve as effective incentives to get them moving. Requirements are kept to a minimum since time is limited between the first exposure to the project and the middle of the term. Written reports are limited to two pages, while oral reports are limited to three minutes. Oral reports are simply summaries of written reports with no unique features, but they are exciting revelations of problem areas chosen and inaugural attempts at improvement.

The five content requirements for mid-term oral and written reports are: (1) identification of the problem area; (2) at least two attack summaries; (3) plans for completing the project; (4) progress, if any, and (5) journal. Journals are returned immediately after the reports, of course, so that students can continue to use them, but

looseleaf notebooks are an advantage to those who are continuing their projects while reports are being evaluated.

As mentioned before, a common problem encountered early in this project is the tendency to be vague or superficial about personal intercultural communication problems being confronted. Mid-term reports serve the very useful purpose of revealing this problem. By discovering the problem early, at least one-half the course remains to narrow and clarify the problem area. One project began, for instance, by describing an intercultural problem as "closed-mindedness", though it eventually focused upon behavior accompanying a narrow, inaccurate definition of migrant-workers. Another project began with the ambiguous announcement of "disrespect for foreign students," and later succeeded in identifying the specific problem as poor listening when engaging a Japanese dialect.

Final

Class time during the final week of the course is set aside for culminating project reports. Written and oral reports have minor differences, but they serve the primary purpose of sharing what has been learned about improving intercultural communication and progress on a specific intercultural deficiency.

Final written reports, which are turned in at the time oral reports are presented, include completed journals and three other subject areas. First, summaries of what students consider to be their best and worst attack sessions are described. Judgments of attack sessions are relative, of course, and no assumptions are made that any one session will be either highly successful or a complete failure. Typically students praise several sessions highly while they condemn a few. Karen observed that "Virtually all of my attack sessions were

beneficial in one way or another," but she considered an interview to be the least beneficial, saying about her interviewee, "...the truths which she revealed to me about how difficult it is to overcome a prejudice such as mine resulted in feelings of discouragement and hopelessness on my part." In contrast, Vicki rated an interview with a counselor at the Women's Center as her "best method of attack," and she had a hard time picking a worst attack, yet she "...felt super uncomfortable..." at a meeting of the Gay Rap-In, so she rated the meeting lower than the interview.

As to which suggested attack methods seem to be perceived as the most effective, writing periods rate highest, sharing sessions second highest, and reading sessions third. Of course, these are the methods most often used, too, so the results are not surprising. Those who engage in more unique attack methods, such as creative sessions, almost always consider them very helpful, but this method is used less often than others. Traditional communication modes, writing, speaking, and listening, still appear to be preferred for solving human communication problems.

Second, final written reports include discussions of perceived progress. Though not unanimous, almost all students feel that the project is helpful, frequently remarking, "As a whole, I feel I made a lot of progress on my problem." On the other hand, Dolores said, "I feel I didn't really accomplish anything much at all." Judgments about progress are obviously highly subjective, but again, the clearer the goal and the more specific the problem area the easier it is to rate progress. If actual learning objectives are written into the project, progress should be easier to evaluate and measure; hence, learning objectives may be worthy of consideration as a variation on the project.

Third, written reports include principles or concepts students have learned while pursuing the project. They are encouraged to list any learned principles, regardless of the source or the number they wish to emphasize. Since written reports have no restrictions on length, emphasis is placed upon quality and sincere feelings of worth or validity.

The results here are interesting because students rarely list profound, complex ideas, or even ideas they consider to be particularly unique, but they list many of the basic principles of effective intercultural communication presented in most textbooks and introductory lectures. Furthermore, there is a distinctly consistent trend in these lists to emphasize principles of intrapersonal communication for dealing with intercultural communication problems. That is, many students list such ideas as: "Develop self-awareness;" "Try to improve your self-concept first;" "Don't let other's prejudices get you down;" "Begin with a positive attitude, believing in yourself and your ability to make progress;" "A strong self-esteem is essential to healthy relationships."

A few other principles frequently suggested include: (1) Deep-seated prejudices take several months or years to overcome. (2) Be yourself, especially during intercultural transactions. (3) Learn to accept people with values, beliefs, and attitudes unlike yours. (4) Respect others' privacy and dignity. (5) Ask for assistance or other information when you feel uncomfortable. (6) Control ethnocentric and evaluative tendencies. (7) Ignorance is frequently the cause of intercultural communication breakdowns.

Final oral reports on the project provide a great deal of emotional and intellectual inspiration. Significant cohesiveness and camaraderie have usually evolved from the group and students are

anxious to share their feelings of growth, maturity, and even setbacks while pursuing the project. These five-to-seven minute reports begin with examples of perceived "highs" and "lows" of the project. Information here usually parallels summaries of best and worst attack sessions in written reports, but classmates of the reporters do not see the written reports, so they enjoy hearing these results. They seem to attend closely to reports of "lows", or setbacks, or even complete failures with certain parts of the project, and a great deal of empathy is expressed.

Next, a single, most important principle learned from the project is announced. While these preferred principles usually reflect the first item on the list of helpful principles in written reports, one trend is evident: Students emphasize that intercultural communication problems originate more often with senders than they do receivers: they resist the temptation to blame others for intercultural communication problems and stress that sharing the blame is ordinarily more realistic. As Noel put it, "I used to think that something was wrong with Blacks who never spoke to me in classes. Now I realize the problem is mine, or at least we may both be at fault."

Oral reports conclude with a final recommendation for those who have similar intercultural communication shortcomings. "If you want to improve, and I hope you do, start by taking a good critical look at yourself, especially before you condemn others." This paraphrase epitomizes final recommendations given in these reports, while a great deal of emphasis is placed also upon ignorance as a direct cause of many intercultural failures.

Fnal reports are spoken with conviction and they tend to be very positive. Students speak of newly acquired intercultural communication concepts and skills as though they have internalized them. They talk

enthusiastically of personal change and of commitment to continuing their present projects and beginning new ones. They speak of developing patience and tolerance and of the need to model better intercultural behavior for their children, spouses, and acquaintances. Most students feel compelled to close with words about the value of the project, too, as Karen did at the top of this paper. David concluded his report by saying, "Although I am happy with the progress I have made, I realize that this project will be non-ending for me. I will continue working on overcoming the 'hang-ups' I have." "This project has been one of the best class assignments I ever was given," according to Darrell, "because I never realized before how important it is for me to control my prejudices. But I think I am well on my way!"

Closing

An outline of the Personal Project, which is received by all students at the outset of the assignment, follows.

PERSONAL PROJECT

Students will design a personal, individual project attacking a specific intercultural communication problem. The project will be due at the end of the quarter, but it will include a mid-term progress report.

I. Problem Areas:
Choose one intercultural communication problem or area from the list below, the course text, or another source. This choice should be a personal problem, prejudice, or concept that you find bothersome or you want to learn more about. It represents an area where you feel the need and commitment to make some real progress. It may seriously affect your relationship with another individual, or another racial, ethnic, social, sexual, or cultural group or subgroup. After you have selected a topic, narrow it down even more. Apply it to a specific person, a specific personal communication habit or behavior, or perhaps a specific group.

A. Possible project problem areas:

1. a specific prejudice
2. tendency to stereotype
3. language barriers
4. nonverbal barriers (space, time, body language--)
5. conflicting values: intolerance
6. ethnocentrism
7. respecting others' dignity
8. inadequate information about a group
9. promoting acculturation
10. avoiding those who are "different"
11. "closed-mindedness"
12. over-sensitivity to criticism
13. disrespecting traditions
14. apathy
15. abuse of humor
16. mistrust
17. judging/evaluating
18. coping with embarrassment
19. "know-it-all"ness
20. culture shock
21. fear of the unknown
22. failure to self-disclose
23. dogmatism
24. resistance to change
25. over-emphasizing appearances
26. going beyond first impressions
27. listening problems
28. dialect/accent barriers
29. short-sightedness; emphasizing the "here-and-now"
30. OTHERS - Your choice.

II. "Attacks":
Intercultural communication problems have to be "attacked" or confronted openly, deliberately, consciously in order to make improvements. Plan and conduct a minimum of TEN "attacks" on the problem you have chosen. Expect to set aside a minimum of 30 MINUTES for each "attack" session. Your method of attack may vary among the following suggested methods:

A. An interview with an appropriate resource person who can help you.

B. A discussion with an individual or individuals who are "victims" of your problem.

C. A reading session from resources pertinent to your problem, such as those suggested in your text bibliographies.

D. A media session (audio recording, videotape, movie, etc.) with

pertinent content.

E. A social event wherein your problem can be confronted and progress attempted.

F. A sharing session with other members of the class who disclose their problems and suggest solutions.

G. A visit to another class or group meeting wherein your problem is examined or demonstrated.

H. A writing period for the purpose of outlining, organizing, describing, or otherwise coming to grips with your problem on paper.

I. A confrontation with your problem in a setting where you are required to use your newly-discovered skills or techniques.

J. A creative approach to your problem through art, music, writing, culinary arts, crafts, or photography.

K. OTHERS - Your choice. Justify.

NOTE: You must choose at least TWO different methods!

III. Journal:
Using a notebook you can hand in later, enter the following neatly in your journal for each of your ten "attack" sessions:

A. "Attack" number: date: time: place.
B. "Attack" method.
C. Area of concentration during this "attack."
D. A brief assessment (4-5 sentences) of your progress.
E. Your objectives or goals for your next "attack" session.

IV. Reports: (Oral and written)

A. Mid-term (Written: 1-2 pages; Oral: 2-3 min.)
1. The specific area of your concentration or "attack".
2. At least two "attack" summaries.
3. Plans for completing the project.
4. Progress, if any, you have made to date.
5. Journal.

B. Final
1. Written:
a. Your completed Journal.
b. A summary of your best and worst "attack" sessions.
c. Progress you made and would still like to make with your problem.
d. A list of helpful principles or concepts you have learned that relate to your project. (These are not limited to your text or class discussions. Do not "pad" this! Include only those things you sincerely feel have been helpful.)
2. Oral:
a. 5-7 minutes
b. Using specific examples, summarize the "highs" and "lows" of your project.
c. Select a single most-important principle you learned from the

project.

d. Close with a final recommendation to others with similar problems.